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Vulgar and Ascetic Christians: the Myth of a Higher Spirituality
The rhetoric of monastic profession as a second baptism

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
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Degree of Master of Arts in Liturgical Studies

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
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9 May 2007

This Paper was written under the direction of

Reverend R. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB J.C.D.

August L. Gothman
has successfully demonstrated the use of
the Latin language
in this paper.

Reverend R. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB J.C.D.

(date)

Vulgar and Ascetic Christians: the Myth of a Higher Spirituality

The rhetoric of monastic profession as a second baptism

Description of the Project:

It is the object of this paper to examine the roots of the rhetoric which developed almost as early as monasticism itself of monastic profession as a “second baptism.” The reader will see how Neo-Platonic thought contributed to the reinforcement of this rhetoric, and how it has been expressed down the ages in both the West and East. Further, this paper examines the challenges this rhetoric received at the hands of the Sixteenth Century Reformers. Finally, it suggests a way to move toward a deeper investigation of the ongoing challenges within the Roman Catholic Church to advance and reinforce a full appreciation of the “universal call to holiness” as taught by the Second Vatican Council and the interrelation of the order of the baptized and the monastic orders. This will lend a proper appreciation for the way the universal call is embodied in the individual lives of Christians.

This paper may be duplicated for educational purposes

Reverend August L. Gothman

9 May 2007

Prosperity and peace introduced the distinction of the *vulgar* and the *Ascetic Christians*. The loose and imperfect practice of religion satisfied the conscience of the multitude. The prince or magistrate, the soldier or merchant, reconciled their fervent zeal and implicit faith with the exercise of their profession, the pursuit of their interest, and the indulgence of their passions but the Ascetics, who obeyed and abused the rigid precepts of the Gospel, were inspired by the savage enthusiasm which represents man as a criminal, and God as a tyrant. They seriously renounced the business and the pleasures of the age; abjured the use of wine, of flesh, and of marriage; chastised their body, mortified their affections, and embraced a life of misery, as the price of eternal happiness. In the reign of Constantine the Ascetics fled from a profane and degenerate world to perpetual solitude or religious society. Like the first Christians of Jerusalem, they resigned the use or the property of their temporal possessions; established regular communities of the same sex and a similar disposition; and assumed the names of *Hermits*, *Monks*, and *Anachorets*, expressive of their lonely retreat in a natural or artificial desert.¹

This is the description of the state of Christian commitment to the faith following the *pax Constantina* by Edward Gibbon in his landmark work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Certainly, the field of historiography has moved far since the days of Gibbon, and his characterization says much about him and the assumptions of his era. However, this mode of thinking still lurks explicitly or implicitly within the Church. His characterization places into two camps those who are called Christians. The division of Christians into “vulgar” (unobservant) and “ascetic” (observant) groups is age-old.

According to the dictionary, ‘vulgar’ comes from the Latin *vulgaris*, which is derived from *vulgus* or ‘common people’.² So, Gibbon described the faith of the common people as only loosely corresponding to that practiced by the Apostles and first followers of Christ. While it may be true that these common folk were not learned in the faith, it is nonetheless pejorative to characterize their faith practice as “loose and imperfect”. These ordinary

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Volume I*. (Chapter XXXVII, Part I), Great Books of the Western World Series, Vol. 37 2nd ed. (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica Inc. 1990), 593.

² Catherine Soanes and Sara Hawker, *Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English*, Third Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/vulgar (last accessed 7 May 2007).

Christians could not but see themselves as second-class citizens in the City of God. Stating that the ascetics obeyed the rigid precepts of the Gospels implies that the vulgar disobeyed. This language of distinction says explicitly that there are those Christians who “really live their faith” while the others are lukewarm. Those who by profession ‘leave the world’ are perceived as making up for and covering over the sins of their brothers and sisters still in the world. It creates a divide between those perceived as “real” and “nominal” Christians. It forces some to the center and leaves others at the margins of Christian living.

Unfortunately, in the estimation of some in the Church, the ideas Gibbon identified as present early in the life of the Church, and which may well have informed his own thinking on the matter in nineteenth century, have not changed as much as some would have hoped. Consider the following quotation:

The unity between professed religious and lay Christians is being undermined by a prejudice that refuses to die—the myth that a higher spirituality exists for professional religious and priests, and a watered down form for lay Christians in the world. Behind this view lurks to suspicion that secular life is a sort of compromise or halfway measure. Any view that keeps alive the ancient prejudice that looked on monks as total Christians and lay persons as partial Christians misunderstands their common vocation.³

So writes Wilkie Au, S.J. in the introduction to his book, *By Way of the Heart: Toward A Holistic Christian Spirituality*. He identifies what he calls an “ancient prejudice” that split Christians into two camps: the “total” Christians, identified as monastics (and later other orders and religious communities) and those who took a compromise position (the laity). The language and rhetoric surrounding the lived Christian life has important meaning for the study of liturgical and sacramental theology. The ways in which people conceive their

³ Wilkie Au, S.J. *By Way of the Heart : Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 6.

own incorporation into the Christian community has much to do with their appropriation of the faith and the ways in which they order the world around them.

It is the object of this paper to examine the roots of this “ancient prejudice”, to see how the approaches of Neo-Platonic thought contributed to the reinforcement of this prejudice, and how it has been expressed down the ages in both the West and East. Further, this paper will examine the challenges this prejudice received at the hands of the Reformers. Finally, it will suggest a way to move toward a deeper investigation of the ongoing challenges within the Roman Catholic Church to advance and reinforce a full appreciation of the “universal call to holiness” as taught by the Second Vatican Council and the interrelation of the order of the baptized and the monastic (and religious) orders. This will lend a proper appreciation for the way the universal call is embodied in the individual lives of Christians, moving beyond categories of vulgar, ascetic, total, compromised. Thus one can see the inherent dignity of all, and their common task of building the Kingdom.

A brief aside with regard to method: It is well beyond the scope of this work to give an exhaustive account of the rhetoric of monastic profession as second baptism: the body of material is simply too rich to begin in the Apostolic age and fully trace its development through every age and author. Rather, this work will focus on certain significant authors or points of view as representative of the broader body of literature. In this way, this work aims to place in dialogue different and divergent strains of the tradition with a view toward suggesting a way forward which avoids the excesses of either polarity.

I. The Language of Baptism and Vocation in the Early Churches

A. Baptism and Vocation in the Pauline Corpus

Saint Paul's rhetoric around the vocation of Christians can be summed up as with the phrases "radical equality" and "unity in diversity". In the letter to the Galatians he writes, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁴ Paul refers to the Church in his letter to the Colossians: "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all."⁵ Paul goes on to write to the Corinthians about the ways in which the Holy Spirit endows the Church with charismatic gifts, "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit."⁶

This is not to say that Saint Paul did not admit of distinctions within the Christian community; clearly he did, but the distinctions are based upon different spiritual gifts, rather than on gradations of spiritual giftedness or holiness. In the Letter to the Romans he writes:

For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.⁷

He refers to different ministries in the Letter to the Ephesians, "And he gave some as

⁴ Galatians 3:27-28. NAB

⁵ Colossians 3:11. NAB

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7. NAB

⁷ Romans 12:4-8 NAB

apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...”⁸ In his manifesto of charisms in chapter twelve of First Corinthians he states:

To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.⁹

It is clear that Saint Paul’s ecclesiology perceived baptism as the rite of Christian initiation and vocation. The spiritual gift given to each member of the Body of Christ was for “some benefit” of the whole Body. However, the varieties of gifts and ministries do not some set some above others, or set some apart as holier than others. The human person is made anew in Christ, which is accomplished by baptism into the paschal mystery. The members of the Church, as members of living Body of Christ—one with their Head—are enlivened with the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the good of all. This Pauline ecclesiology and anthropology was carried by the Church into the age of the early Church: the age of the martyrs.

B. Militia Christi: Martyrdom, baptism, and early monastic rhetoric

Edward Gibbon, as seen above, referred to the historic change that happened to the Church in the wake of the conversion of Constantine the Great in the first decades of the fourth century. Up to this point, the Church had been an underground and marginalized sect. It had been accused as atheistic in that it did not honor the Roman pantheon and

⁸ Ephesians 4:11-12 NAB

⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:8-11 NAB

denied the divinity of Caesar, and was thus the subject of persecution by Roman authorities. The heroes and heroines of the early Christians were those who witnessed to Christ to the point of shedding their own blood. During the age of martyrs, Christian authors began to speak of the baptism of blood in martyrdom as analogous to the baptism of water.¹⁰ In 313 the Edict of Milan gave the Church legal standing. The Emperor became a convert and catechumen, and the whole state of the Church changed. The Church emerged from the catacombs and was given cathedrals. This was a huge shift in Church life and spirituality. In the words of Dominican Jordan Aumann, “In the earliest days of the Church the supreme witness to Christ was martyrdom.”¹¹ But once Christians obtained their freedom and Christianity became the official religion, “it is no longer the pagan world that fights and eliminates the martyr; it is the hermit [monastic] that takes up the attack and eliminates the world from his being.”¹² Saint Athanasius wrote in *The Life of Antony* that Saint Antony—the Father of Monasticism—left his desert retreat during the persecution under the emperor Maximin Daia in 311 hoping for martyrdom, although he did not find it. Athanasius tells his readers that when he went home, Saint Antony was, “a daily martyr to his conscience, ever fighting the battles of the faith.”¹³ *The Life of Antony* was wildly popular and widely distributed within years of its writing.¹⁴ Saint Augustine refers to the impact it had on him

¹⁰ Tertullian used the term “washing of blood” (*lavacrum sanguinis*) in his work *De Baptismo* (xvi) to differentiate this from “washing of water” (*lavacrum aquae*). Saint Cyprian of Carthage [who suffered martyrdom himself] writes about “the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood” (*sanguinis baptismus*) in *Epistle LXXIII*. “Baptism,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia: Volume Two*, (New York: Robert Appleton & Co., 1907), 266.

¹¹ Jordan Aumann OP, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 34.

¹² Aumann, 34.

¹³ Saint Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* #47 as quoted in “The Origins of Monasticism in the Eastern Church”, *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English with notes*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), 20.

¹⁴ A good modern English translation is: *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. & intro. Robert C. Gregg, The Classics of Western Spirituality series, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980).

and his contemporaries in Book 8 of *The Confessions*.¹⁵ The phenomenon of monasticism had an increasingly powerful effect on the Church and the ideals of Christian holiness from the third and fourth centuries on. The monastic movement produced its own body of literature. *The Apophthegmata Patrum* was a collection containing stories of monastic heroes and heroines in the desert.¹⁶ This, along with *The Life of Antony*, spread the monastic ideal among the wider Christian world.

Edward Malone OSB writes of the relationship between the martyr and the monk in the religious imagination of the age.¹⁷ This shows the change of thought surrounding the nature of monastic life and its relation to Christian life as a whole. Malone's meticulous study of the early Patristic references has noted that the ritual analog of the promises of baptism and the promises of the monastic are the source for connecting monastic profession and baptism. Malone states that the ritual promises of both baptism and profession emerged from the cultural milieu of Roman military service.¹⁸ The promises made by the soldier were understood to have a civil and religious effect, and this religious aspect played a large part in the resistance of Christians to serve in the Roman army.¹⁹ Then, as now, the baptismal promises contain two parts: a renunciation of the former way of life in sin (αποταχισ-apotaxis) and a positive commitment to serve Christ (συνταχισ-syntaxis).

¹⁵ Augustine tells the story of his encounter with Ponticianus, who related to Augustine the story of two associates who were converted to the faith and a monastic life upon reading *The Life of Antony*. *The Confessions* trans. Maria Boulding, OSB. Vintage Spiritual Classics (New York: Random House, 1998) 156-8.

¹⁶ One such collection in English translation is by the venerable E. A. Wallis Budge: *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907).

¹⁷ Edward Eugene Malone, OSB, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr*, (S.T.D. diss.) The Catholic University of America. Studies in Christian Antiquity, no. 12. ed. Johannes Quasten, (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 112-143. Fr. Malone's section, "Martyrdom and Monastic Profession as a Second Baptism," was also published in *Vom Christlichen Mysterium: Gesammelte Arbeiten zum Gedächtnis von Odo Casel OSB*, eds. Anton Mayer, Johannes Quasten, Burkhard Neunheuser. (Düsseldorf : Patmos-Verlag, 1951), 115-134.

¹⁸ Malone 112-4.

¹⁹ Malone, 115-6.

Malone shows that the apotaxis-syntaxis of baptism was progressively applied to the emerging rituals for entering monastic life. The connection was made early on between the commitment for life of the Christian (who was increasingly likely to face persecution) and the growing numbers of monastics (who left the world to endure the privations of the desert). Without the “witness” of the martyrs, the Christian imagination turned to the monastics for sources of inspiration. Thus, the color of martyrdom itself changed from blood red to pure white. Those who “left the world” and went off to the desert became the new generation of spiritual champions in the Christian world. As monastics gradually acquired a new status, their commitment and vows became more and more revered.

II. Christians are not born; they are made—in monasteries

A. Pseudo-Dionysius: A Neo-Platonic expansion of the rhetoric of second baptism

In lifting up the monastic vocation, the Church slowly started to change the focus and language around monasticism and religious life. This is well-characterized by a writer in the Patristic era, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. His rhetoric around monastic profession and second baptism is the first set out for examination.

To readers before the contemporary era, this author was believed to be a contemporary of Saint Paul, the man referred to in Acts of the Apostles chapter 17, “Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”²⁰ However, as the writings demonstrate the Neo-Platonic thought of Proclus and Plotinus, it is clear that this anonymous and pseudonymous author wrote

²⁰ Acts 17:34 NAB

around A.D. 500.²¹ In the work entitled *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius uses categories of Neo-Platonic philosophy to describe the sacraments or ‘mysteries’ of the Church. If a date for Pseudo-Dionysius’ writing is assumed in the early sixth century, then he is among the earliest writers who make a list of the Church’s mysteries-sacraments. Pseudo-Dionysius’ list includes baptism, eucharist, chrismation, orders, monastic tonsure, and rites for the dead. His thought had great impact upon the sacramental and spiritual theology both in the East and in the West. It is interesting to note that Pseudo-Dionysius numbered monastic tonsure-profession among the mysteries of the Church. In the West, his influence was strongest up through the Scholastic period; in the East, until the present day.

If one considers Pseudo-Dionysius a Neo-Platonist first, it is clear why he used hierarchical language for monastic profession. The notion of “leaving the world” and entering into contemplation suited the Neo-Platonic view of the human person and the “end” human life. There is a certain dualism borrowed from the Platonists between form and matter inherent in his thought. In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, he laid out his understanding of the rationale for monastic life:

Of all the orders of the initiated, the highest is the holy order of the monks, which has been cleansed by a complete purification. By means of its integral power and the absolute purity of its activities, it has acquired the ability to contemplate with spiritual vision and communion every sacred work as far as permissible... on account of their undivided and unified life, which unifies them by holy combinations of their differences into godlike unity and perfection...[and] imposed on them a perfecting grace, and deemed them worthy of a certain sanctifying invocation that is not pontifical, (since it is reserved for the priestly orders alone), but consecratory, being used by the holy priests in hierarchical initiation of the second rank.²²

²¹ “Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume Five*. (New York: Robert Appleton & Co., 1907), 13.

²² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy (EH)*, 6.1.3. *Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite: The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. trans. Thomas L. Campbell (Lanham, MD:University Press of America, 1981), 74-5.

Pseudo-Dionysius said that the monastic is of a higher rank than the baptized, this owing to the “complete purification” flowing from contemplation. Monks are of a higher rank because they have completely devoted themselves to contemplating the things above. Further, their contemplation has “imposed on them a perfecting grace,” and given them “godlike unity and perfection,” raising them to second rank below the sacerdotal hierarchy.

Pseudo-Dionysius gives a description of the rite of monastic profession reflecting the deep parallel structure of apotaxis-syntaxis found in baptism and profession, as well as his Neo-Platonic thought:

The priest stands before the divine altar, and pronounces the sacred words of the monastic invocation. The one to be consecrated stands behind the priest. He does not genuflect on two knees, nor even on one, nor does he have on his head the God-given Scriptures. He just stands near the priest who is sacredly pronouncing the mystical invocation over him. When he has finished this, the priest approaches the one being consecrated and first *asks him whether he renounces everything divisive in imagination as well as in action. Then he explains to him the most perfect life and warns him that he must rise above a mediocre way of life. When the one being consecrated firmly promises all this*, the priest seals him with the sign of the cross and cuts his hair, while invoking the three Persons of the divine Beatitude. He strips off all the man’s clothing and covers him with a new garment. Along with the other holy men present, he gives the man the kiss of peace, and makes him sharer in the supremely divine Mysteries.²³

Pseudo-Dionysius’ contemplation of the rite draws out obvious parallels and the apotaxis-syntaxis inherent in the rites of baptism and monastic profession as he understood it. The apotaxis-renunciation of evil and the baptismal promises are translated to profession: “The renunciation of not only actions but even thoughts of divisive things manifests the most perfect love of wisdom of the monks... As I said, their rank among the initiated is not in the middle, but higher than all”²⁴ The signing with the cross during the baptismal rite has a parallel in profession. “We have already said that the sealing with the sign of the cross

²³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *EH* 6.2. Campbell, 75. *emphasis added*.

²⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *EH* 6.3.2. Campbell, 76.

signifies the inertia of all carnal desires.”²⁵ The clothing with baptismal garments has its analogue in the giving of the monastic garb. “The casting aside of the former clothing and putting on of the new signifies the transfer from a mediocely holy life to a more perfect...”²⁶

Pseudo-Dionysius’ rhetoric of moving from a less to a more perfect way of life, of giving up the desires of the flesh, and the renunciations of all but the perfect love of wisdom have the effect of reinforcing that monastics belong to a special, higher class of ecclesiastical persons, people who are set apart for and closer to God. The more ancient understanding, which saw apotaxis-syntaxis as the primary commitment incumbent on every one of the baptized, is here limited in scope to those who undertake the monastic life. We see here what was formerly baptismal language elevated so that tonsure-profession is spoken of as a ‘second baptism’. Pseudo-Dionysius’ categories exercise considerable influence on theology particularly in the Orthodox Churches even to the present.

B. Contemporary Orthodoxy: A Dionysian inheritance of monastic profession and second baptism

The second example for consideration of the language of second baptism comes from the Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox Churches inherited the already familiar Neo-Platonic thought forms of Pseudo-Dionysius. Among later witnesses to this continuing Dionysian tradition are Saint Theodore Studites (†826) and Patriarch John of Antioch (†1118). Malone states that the claims made by the Antiochene Patriarch was the distillation of the theological ideas circulating for centuries when he wrote the following:

It is a fact made clear, that the sacred initiation of monks, by way of reminder, in imitation of holy baptism is composed of renunciations [apotagais] and

²⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *EH* 6.3.3. Campbell, 76.

²⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *EH* 6.3.4. Campbell, 76.

resolutions [syntagais]...our holy fathers have named [profession] a second baptism and renewal of the first.²⁷

This Dionysian theology still informs contemporary depictions of monastic profession within the Orthodox Churches. This is clearly seen when one looks to information about Orthodox monasticism such as that from Saint Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The language of monastic profession as second baptism is present. In an article on "The Monastic Grades", this language is in full flower:

The Monastic Tonsure (or Profession) can be seen as the mystical marriage of the soul with the Heavenly Bridegroom, but it also can be seen as a second Baptism, inasmuch as the very ceremony parallels the actual Baptism ceremony. The candidate for the Monastic Tonsure comes as a penitent, as though to Baptism. [In the original Greek of the rite, the candidate is referred to as a catechumen, and he fulfils, in a sense, a catechumenate prior to the Monastic Tonsure in his three-year probation.]²⁸

There are many explicit references making tonsure-profession parallel to baptism. The author makes a point by point comparison. The candidate is unclothed, as if he/she were to be baptized. The monastic vows are like those of baptism, which make a new beginning of goodness. A new name is given the monastic, just as one is named in baptism. Both the newly baptized and monastic receive a cross and lighted candle. The hair is tonsured both of the monk and the baptized. The author concludes by stating: "Thus, it is obvious that the resemblance of the Monastic Tonsure to Baptism is not accidental; indeed, in the instructions given to the monastic Catechumen...the following words are said: *A second Baptism you are receiving...and you shall be cleansed from your sins.*"²⁹

²⁷ Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr*, 123-4.

²⁸ *The Monastic Grades: The Tonsure*, <http://www.stots.edu/article.php?id=25>, last accessed 7 May 2007.

²⁹ *The Monastic Grades: The Tonsure*, *emphasis added*. <http://www.stots.edu/article.php?id=25> last accessed 7 May 2007.

Thus, the theological trajectory exemplified by Pseudo-Dionysius came to its logical fulfillment. Here is monastic life described as a “state of perfection” which sets one apart from other Christians. The ritual of tonsure-profession is explicitly called second baptism with point by point comparison. The esteem afforded is ironic in that those who originally “left the world” and gave up all titles or honorifics to seek God in solitude, silence, and simplicity became subjects of adulation.

C. The medieval West’s understanding parallels that of the East

The fact is that Occidental rhetoric involving monastic profession paralleled that seen in the Oriental churches at the time. That this is so is clear from the language the Reformers later used to critique it. Both had inherited a hierarchical, pyramidal vision of both Church (and society at large) that went largely unchallenged for centuries. As seen above, medieval Christendom, mirroring medieval culture, was a rigidly structured hierarchy. In this hierarchy there were definite grades in rank and status, both on the secular and ecclesiastical realms. In the Church clergy occupied the top rank, and among the clergy there were distinct grades. High prelates (the Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops) outranked the domestic prelates (Monsignors) and Abbots. Below them were monastic clergy, cathedral canons, clerks regular, and the secular clergy. Lower yet were those in minor orders, other religious, and lay monastics. The numerically largest group—the laity—formed the base layer of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The rights, privileges, duties, and obligations of all were highly regulated both by canon and civil law. It was a class of ecclesial relationships people like Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin and others set out to reform. They used the canon of Scripture, particularly Saint Paul’s writings, to call into question and

argue against widely held beliefs. The works of these three serve as a representative sampling of Reformation ideas with regard to the monastic profession as second baptism.

III. Protestant critiques on the basis of Scripture of the received rhetoric

The Reformers of the sixteenth century sought to recover an ecclesiology and anthropology which expressed the essential unity of all the baptized, precisely in virtue of their baptism. Luther argued for the absolute equality of the baptized: the priesthood of all believers. He strongly argued that any further specialization was purely functional. Melancthon and Calvin examined the claims made for the high valuation of monastic vows and found them to be without Biblical merit.

A. Luther and Melancthon: Pauline anthropology informing ecclesiology

In 1520 Martin Luther published three documents that forever changed western Christendom. In one of these, the "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," Luther detailed the corruptions he identified in the Church's hierarchy. He is characteristically unsubtle:

It has been devised that the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the *spiritual estate*, princes, lords, artificers, and peasants are the *temporal estate*. This is an artful lie and hypocritical device, but let no one be made afraid by it, and that for this reason: that all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone. As Saint Paul says (1 Cor. xii.), we are all one body, though each member does its own work, to serve the others. This is because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, Gospel, and faith, these alone make spiritual and Christian people.³⁰

³⁰ Martin Luther, "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate", trans. C. A. Buchheim, *The Harvard Classics Vol. XXXVI*, Part 5, (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14) Bartleby.com, 2001. <http://www.bartleby.com/36/5/2.html> last accessed 7 May 2007.

Luther retrieved the language and rhetoric of Saint Paul in his argument against any special dignity afforded those in 'high' office. He used the language of I Corinthians 12 examined above to argue for radical equality among all the baptized. While he abolished this gradation in status, he also preempted any possibility for arguing for the particular dignity of monastic vows.

A decade later, Philip Melanchthon, Luther's younger collaborator, clarified in the Augsburg Confession what he and Luther made of monastic vows and profession:

People said that vows were equal to baptism, and they taught that vows merited forgiveness of sins and justification before God through this kind of life. Indeed, they added that monastic life not only merited not only righteousness before God but even more: that it kept not only precepts, but also the Evangelical counsels. In this way they were convinced that the monastic profession was far better than baptism and that the monastic life was more meritorious than the life of magistrates, pastors, and the like...³¹

Melanchthon confirmed the degree of elevation in monastic vows in the Catholic Church of his day, and he argued that the manner of speaking of the monastic life and its merits at the time were unfounded. He makes his argument with much force:

However, very clearly monks have taught that their humanly invented observances make satisfaction for sins and merit grace and justification. What is this but to detract from the glory of Christ and to obscure and deny the righteousness of faith?... Paul says, [Gal. 5: 4]: "You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." Therefore those who want to be justified by vows fall away from Christ and are cut off from grace. For those who ascribe justification to vows, ascribe to their own works what properly belongs to the glory of Christ.³²

B. John Calvin: misplaced trust in the efficacy of monastic profession

³¹ Philip Melanchthon, "The Augsburg Confession (Latin Text): The Confession of Faith Presented to the Invincible Emperor, Charles V, Caesar Augustus, in the City of Augsburg in the Year 1530," XXVII.11-13, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; trans. Charles Arand et al, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 83.

³² Augsburg Confession XXVII. 38, 41-43. 88-9.

It was not only the Lutherans who took issue with the claimed efficacy of monastic vows. John Calvin treated monastic vows at some length in his work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The passage below gives one a flavor of his tone and line of argumentation.

Although nothing is farther from the thinking of the Fathers than to establish the manner of perfection which was later crafted by these cucullated Sophists; so that a kind of dual Christianity was founded. Indeed, that sacrilegious dogma had not yet come to birth which compares monastic profession and Baptism; or more correctly plainly asserts it to be a form of second Baptism.³³

One of Calvin's greatest frustrations with monastics and other religious seemed to be the haughtiness in their manner, and the fact that in distinguishing themselves from one another, they fell into the trap of the partisan divisions within the Body of Christ Saint Paul had to confront in the Church at Corinth.

They themselves have not been ashamed to boast of that which Paul so execrates that he cannot heap enough scorn upon it (1 Cor. 1:12, 13; 3:4). Unless, perhaps, we judge that Christ was divided by the Corinthians, when one teacher set himself over against another; and now without any offense being done to Christ when we hear that instead of Christians some are called Benedictines, others Franciscans, others Dominicans; and they proudly substitute these names from their religious profession, while they affect to be distinguished from ordinary Christians.³⁴

Clearly, Calvin may have engaged in some degree of hyperbole, but it may only have been to attempt to offer a corrective to the degree the language surrounding monastic profession, second baptism, and states of perfection had drowned out the essential equality of all stemming from baptism as found in the Letters of Saint Paul.

³³ Author's translation. "Quanquam nihil minus cogitarunt Patres, quam stabilare eiusmodi perfectionem quae postea a cucullatis Sophistis fabrefacta fuit, ut duplicem Christianismum sic erigerent. Nondum enim natum erat sacrilegum illud dogma quod professionem monasticas Baptismo comparat, imo palam asserit, formam esse secundi Baptismi." Joannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta* vol. 5. *Institutionis Christianae religionis 1559 librum IV continens*. ed. Petrus Barth et Guilelmus Niesel. (Book 4, chapter 13, section 14.), 251.

³⁴ Author's translation. "Nec ipsos puduit in eo gloriari quod sic execratur Paulus ut satis exaggerare non possit [1 Cor. 1. b. 12, et 3. a. 4]. Nisi forte Christum fuisse a Corinthiis divisum arbitramur, quum alius alio doctore superbiret: et nunc sine ulla Christi iniuria fieri quod pro Christianis alios Benedictinos, alios Franciscanos, alios Dominicanos vocari audimus: et ita vocari, ut ipsi, dum affectant a vulgo Christianorum distingui, hos titulos pro religionis professione fastuose sis sumant." J. Calvini, *Institutionis* (Book 4 chapter 13 section 14.), 252.

IV. Shift in Catholic theology in light of theological renewal

Having examined the development and trajectories of the rhetoric describing monastic profession as second baptism East and West, Catholic and Protestant theologies, it is time to examine contemporary language relating baptism and profession. It will be helpful to briefly recall the shift that Catholic theologians brought about in ecclesiology in the last century and a half. From there the developments were picked up by papal and Magisterial documents before and after Vatican II. We shall describe the rhetoric currently employed by magisterial teaching and the ways two writers have applied this teaching. Finally, it shall be suggested that the way forward lies in a due appreciation for the contributions and charismatic gifts given to each in baptism rightly ordered by the Body of Christ—Head and members.

A. Rediscovery of the Mystical Body of Christ

In the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, a theological renewal took shape and bore fruit among the Churches. The return to the sources of the Sacred Scripture and Patristic authors breathed new life into older concepts. This, in turn, caused a renewal within the areas of Catholic ecclesiology. The recovery of the Pauline understanding and imagery of the Body of Christ was given magisterial approbation with Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter *Mystici corporis* in 1943. While it maintained the central role of a hierarchical structure, it made inroads for an understanding that all the baptized have a role to play in the functioning of the Mystical Body. "Through the waters of Baptism those who are born into this world dead in sin are not only born again and made members of the Church, but being

stamped with a spiritual seal they become able and fit to receive the other Sacraments.”³⁵

Later in the document the Pope wrote: “Christ our Lord wills the Church to live His own supernatural life, and by His divine power permeates His whole Body and nourishes and sustains each of the members according to the place which they occupy in the body.”³⁶ This was a significant shift in Catholic ecclesiology and a fuller understanding of the relationship between baptism and holiness of life.

B. Images of the Church from the Second Vatican Council

Along with the image of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council employed the ecclesiological image of the Church as the ‘People of God’ as they deliberated and promulgated documents that sought to express the relationship of the Church to the modern world. The People of God is the title of the second chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (‘The Body of Christ’ is the title of the first chapter). The Council fathers wrote of the baptized: “Incorporated in the Church through baptism, the faithful are appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship; reborn as sons [sic] of God they must profess before men [sic] the faith they have received from God through the Church.”³⁷ This line is taken from Saint Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, and it is interesting to note that this quotation is separated by

³⁵ PIUS XII *Mystici corporis*, #18, 29 June 1943 *AAS* 35 (1943).

³⁶ PIUS XII *Mystici corporis*. #55.

³⁷ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, #11. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery OP, (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1992), 361.

only a few pages in the text from the Angelic Doctor's treatment of "baptism by blood"—that early language for Christian vocation and martyrdom.³⁸

C. The relationship of religious profession and baptism: *Perfectae caritatis* and beyond

Rather than speaking of religious/monastic vows as a 'second baptism', the change in language states that vows deepen, perfect, or specify the original baptismal commitment. In the Council's decree on the renewal of the religious life, *Perfectae caritatis*, the Bishops wrote of the relationship of religious vows and baptism: "This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of baptism and expresses it more fully."³⁹ One must also take into account *Lumen gentium*, and the teaching on the universal call to holiness:

Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification". (1 Thes. 4, 3; cf. Eph. 1:4) However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called "evangelical." This practice of the counsels, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit, undertaken by many Christians, either privately or in a Church-approved condition or state of life, gives and must give in the world an outstanding witness and example of this same holiness.⁴⁰

In 1983, The Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes promulgated a document entitled, "Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate". This is a

³⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, q. 63, a. 2., *Summa Theologica, The First Complete American edition*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province Volume Two, (New York, Benziger Bros, 1947), 2362.

³⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Perfectae caritatis*, "Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life," #5, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html last accessed 7 May 2007.

⁴⁰ *Lumen Gentium* #39, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html last accessed 7 May 2007.

compilation of the teaching of Vatican II on the proper understanding of vowed life within the Church. Such an understanding begins with a proper appreciation of Jesus and his relationship with the Father, and how the Christian enters into and shares that consecrated relationship.

Jesus himself is the one whom the Father consecrated and sent in a supreme way (cf. Jn 10:36). He sums up all the consecrations of the old law, which foreshadowed his own, and in him is consecrated the new People of God, henceforth mysteriously united to him. By baptism, Jesus shares his life with each Christian. Each is sanctified in the Son. Each is called to holiness. Each is sent to share the mission of Christ and is given the capacity to grow in the love and service of the Lord. This baptismal gift is the fundamental Christian consecration and is the root of all others.

Jesus lived his own consecration precisely as Son of God: dependent on the Father, loving him above all and completely given to his will. These aspects of his life as Son are shared by all Christians. To some, however, for the sake of all, God gives the gift of a closer following of Christ in his poverty, chastity, and obedience through a public profession of these counsels mediated by the Church. This profession, in imitation of Christ, manifests a particular consecration which is "rooted in that of baptism and is a fuller expression of it" [*Perfectae caritatis* 5].⁴¹

V. Contemporary Reflections on Baptism, Profession, and Christian life

So, it is clear that the Catholic magisterium no longer uses the rhetoric of "second baptism" when referring to monastic or religious vows. This is a marked and deliberate theological shift. It assumes a change in Christian anthropology and ecclesiology in which all the baptized are one. It recovers an earlier mode of thought, much closer to the theology of Saint Paul. It recalls the image of the body and members, each member essential for the body's proper functioning. It will be well to linger on this point somewhat, and to suggest what outcomes can result from such a reappropriation of language regarding baptism and

⁴¹ The Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, "Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate" #6-7. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_31051983_magisterium-on-religious-life_en.html last accessed 7 May 2007.

monastic/religious vocation have for the future of the Church. An insight from a contemporary theologian and a spiritual writer can help suggest ways forward in this regard.

A. Baptismal apotaxis-syntaxis as the basis for monastic vocation

Mary Margaret Funk, OSB has written a trilogy of books in which she offers modern readers ancient monastic wisdom by writers like John Cassian and others. In her third volume, *Humility Matters for Practicing the Spiritual Life*, Sr. Meg offers the following meditation on the first renunciation (apotaxis)—hearkening all the way back to Athanasius and the desert abbas and ammas:

In the monastery we sustain this first renunciation to change from our former way of life by promising to live the monastic way of life. *Conversatio morum* is the life-long labor to actualize the fundamental renunciation of baptism by a daily dedication to change our habits and patterns of living...In whatever vocation we have, whether that of a householder or a monastic, the spiritual journey cannot proceed solely above the surface of the river.⁴²

Formed by the renewed understanding of the interrelation of baptism and monastic vocation, Funk states that the apotaxis and syntaxis of one's baptism is the foundational commitment and call to live the Christian life. Indeed, some in the Church live out their baptismal vocation within monastic or other vowed communities, yet many do not. The monastic vocation specifies rather than replaces the baptismal calling. Sr. Meg argues that all the baptized must seek to enter deeply into the river of life. In this she reflects the shift in emphasis within the Church's theology. Since "all are one in Christ Jesus;" the call is one, though as unique as every individual member of the body.⁴³ Recovering the dignity of the vocation first given in baptism has given the Church a fuller and more profound way in

⁴² Mary Margaret Funk, *Humility Matters for Practicing the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 22 underlining added.

⁴³ Galatians 3:28. NAB

which to value and appreciate the dynamic, pneumatic charisms present and active in the all members of the Church. In such an understanding, each member's gift is ordered in the Body of Christ for the good of all.

B. A Dynamic Coordination of Orders: image of a renewed Church

Theologian Aidan Kavanaugh has also made a contribution to this ongoing conversation within theology and ecclesial understanding. In his slim volume *Elements of Rite*, Kavanaugh states what he called 'general laws of liturgy'. The eleventh reads as follows: "The liturgical assembly is less a gathering of individuals than a dynamic coordination or orders."⁴⁴ He is speaking here of an ecclesiology based on the orders in the Church: the order of catechumens, baptized, deacons, presbyters, bishops, (in an earlier age widows and penitents) and the religious and monastic orders. Kavanaugh writes, "...their shared witness, charisms, obligations, and styles all contribute in rich diversity to the Church's ministry...."⁴⁵ This ecclesiology of various orders within the Church stems from the determination that all are necessary for the common witness to the Gospel. What the language of second baptism did was to elevate the religious orders and denigrate the order of the baptized.

Christ's gifts from the Father through the Spirit are given for all. They have but one source and one orientation. Recovering such an understanding orients all to take a rightful place (order) within the Church. Each order has a unique and indispensable charism to share with the world. The task of each and all is to make real and celebrate in every age the words of Saint Paul to the Ephesians: "There is one Body, one Spirit, just as one hope is the

⁴⁴ Aidan Kavanaugh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (New York: Pueblo, 1982), 45.

⁴⁵ Kavanaugh, 45.

goal of your calling by God. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, over all, through all and within all. On each one of us God's favour has been bestowed in whatever way Christ allotted it.”⁴⁶

VI. Conclusion

In an age in which martyrdom became a memory, those who fled from the corruption of the world became the new Christian heroes. Their status was raised to great proportions and their monastic profession was considered a sacrament or mystery of the Church on par with other sacraments. This second, monastic baptism was further elevated in the language of the Church, such that the Reformers attacked this language as erasing any need for the mediation of salvation by Christ. The Catholic Church's renewed ecclesiology and anthropology have recast the vocation of the vowed life as a fuller expression of the baptismal charism. There is no doubt that the monastic-religious life is a species of divine vocation; but one to which not all are called. However, efforts to set the vowed apart have done just that, and the language of second baptism gave a quasi-sacramental rationale for such separation.

The recovery of the understanding represented by the Pauline appreciation for the variety and necessity of all the gifts is needed. Understanding the Church as a dynamically ordered, spiritually gifted body in which all have particular and indispensable roles will provide a way forward. This moves the discussion past higher and lower dignities among the People of God and values each for his or her unique contribution to building the Reign of God. This will lead beyond categories of vulgar, ascetic, total, compromised as applied to members of Christ's Mystical Body. Thus one shall see the inherent dignity of all, and their

⁴⁶ Ephesians 4:4-7. New Jerusalem Bible.

common task of building the Kingdom. With vocation cast in it's proper context, flowing from the spiritual gifts given in the waters of baptism all can know themselves to be vital members of Christ.

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